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The United Nations website: recent developments and progress towards parity among the official languages

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is the seventh in the series addressing the multilingual development, maintenance and enrichment of the United Nations website. It is submitted to the Committee on Information to provide updated information on progress towards achieving parity among the official languages on the United Nations website.

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I. Introduction

1. Since June 1995, when the official United Nations website was established on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Organization, parity between the six official languages on the site has been one of the major issues of concern of the Committee on Information. Six reports of the Secretary-General have addressed this issue: A/AC.198/1999/6, A/AC.198/1999/9 and Corr.1 and 2, A/AC.198/2000/7-A/AC.172/2000/4, A/AC.198/2001/8, A/AC.198/2002/6 and A/AC.198/2005/6. In a report to the General Assembly at its fifty-seventh session (A/57/355) the Secretary-General laid down the resource requirements for establishing the six language units on a firm footing to meet the challenges of moving towards parity of the official languages on the United Nations website. The present report provides an update of the progress made towards language parity on the United Nations website and outlines future steps that will further enhance it.

II. Background

2. The General Assembly, in its resolution 60/109 B of 8 December 2005, reaffirmed that the United Nations website remains a very useful tool for the media, non-governmental organizations, educational institutions, Member States and the general public. It recognized the efforts of the Department of Public Information of the Secretariat in creating and maintaining it, and reaffirmed the need to achieve full parity among the six official languages on the United Nations website. The Assembly took note of the fact that the multilingual development and enrichment of the United Nations website had improved, although at a slower rate than expected owing to several constraints that needed to be addressed, and, in that regard, requested the Department of Public Information, in coordination with content-providing offices, to improve the actions undertaken to achieve parity among the six official languages on the United Nations website

3. In the same resolution, the General Assembly also noted that the integration of the Official Document System (ODS) with the United Nations website had resulted in a significant enhancement of the multilingual nature of the website owing to availability of United Nations parliamentary documentation in the six official languages. In addition, the Assembly recognized the efforts made by the Department to implement the basic accessibility requirements for persons with disabilities to the United Nations website. It called upon the Department to continue to work towards compliance with all levels of accessibility requirements on all pages of the website with the aim of ensuring its accessibility.

III. Current governance and management

4. The goal of parity among the official languages on the United Nations website set by Member States poses a particular challenge not only for the Department of Public Information as manager of the website, but also for all other content-providing offices. The sheer complexity and practicality of the problem and the scale of resources needed to meet the request of the General Assembly has been submitted in earlier reports to the Committee on Information and to the Fifth Committee.

5. The challenge facing the Secretariat in moving towards the goal of parity in the official languages on the United Nations website has many aspects. Fundamental is the reality that every day more material is being placed on the site by author departments in the working languages, English and French, but overwhelmingly in the former. This constant building of the website is carried out within a decentralized governance structure. The Department of Public Information has worked through the Working Group on Internet Matters, which the Department chairs, as well as bilaterally with other content-providing offices to promote multilingualism and site coherence in a practical manner. This effort has been slow and has meant considerable limitations in the Department's capacity to drive the goal of parity forward, particularly given the reality of budgetary and technical constraints facing all departments in this regard.

6. The need for continuous renewal of the website means the challenge of achieving parity is made more complex every day. The General Assembly, in its resolution 60/109 B, in reaffirming its request to the Secretary-General to ensure an adequate distribution of financial and human resources within the Department of Public Information for the website among all official languages, also stated that it should be done while maintaining an up-to-date and accurate website.

7. There are several conceptual issues relating to parity among official languages on the website which are important to note. Simply increasing the number of pages in official languages is not a real solution, because there is a need to ensure technical resources to support them. Every new piece of information going up on the website requires a further commitment to monitoring and updating; otherwise, the purpose of the website is seriously undermined, especially in today's world of multiple electronic sources of immediate news and information. The commitment of resources to this function for pages in all official languages is therefore essential, but comes at a cost in the pace in which new material can be processed in all languages.

8. While the fact of continuous new material presents a major challenge in enhancing the multilingual nature of the United Nations website, technical changes are nevertheless producing progress towards this goal in a number of ways. The Department is working towards enhancing the multimedia nature of the site, and through it, the delivery of material in audio and visual forms to an expanding global audience. Radio files in all the official languages, Kiswahili, Portuguese, as well as Bangla, Hindi, Indonesian and Urdu, are enhancing the multilingualism of the site. Webcasting is now available in the floor language and the Department is planning its gradual expansion to the other official languages, again offering a daily enhancement of the multilingualism of the site. Given that the rationale behind the drive to enhancing multilingualism on the website is to ensure wider access to information on the United Nations to all the peoples of the world, such technical enhancements to the site are a key means to that end, along with progress in such areas as improving access for persons with disabilities.

9. With respect to the mandate to publish in the official languages, Member States have recognized the responsibility of the individual author departments for producing their websites in the official languages. The Department of Public Information has sought to actively promote multilingualism on the United Nations website across the Secretariat through the Working Group on Internet Matters, as well as bilaterally with author offices. The present governance structure, however,

which lacks an adequate set of standards and an accountability mechanism, has invariably led to a site wanting in multilingual content, as well as in presentational consistency and organizational branding. Offices have developed sites at their own initiative, without an organizational oversight mechanism that would establish agreed standards and goals, instead of merely producing guidelines. In many cases, standard coding practices have been dispensed with, causing system instabilities. The Department is reviewing the entire governance mechanism in coordination with the Information Technology Services Division of the Department of Management, to ensure a system that provides coherent organizational strategies for both content and technology. An important element of this will be the revitalization of the Working Group on Internet Matters, as a mechanism for more effective encouragement and coordination with content-providing offices for publishing content in all official languages. The Department is also working with the Information Technology Services Division to develop common technical standards for software and programming, as opposed to guidelines, and intends to make these standards an organizational requirement.

10. A system of governance that will introduce coherence is essential for further development of the website and progress towards language parity. It is a challenge to put into place an overall governance scheme for coherent management and governance of the public website that allows differing authoring offices the creativity to meet the needs of their particular audiences — be they government officials, the media, academia, civil society or the public at large — while ensuring a unitary technical infrastructure, consistency in presentation, organizational branding, addressing accessibility needs, as well as the imperative of producing material in all official languages. There is a need for a robust and secure system that can grow and develop, leading to greater efficiencies in the management of multilingual content.

11. In terms of its own areas of responsibility, the Department has striven to ensure language parity in key areas of information about the Organization and its activities. For example, the websites of the General Assembly and the Security Council provide access to the documents and activities of these two bodies in the six official languages; the News Centres provide breaking news on a 24-hour news cycle in all languages, the United Nations Radio web pages provide Radio news in all official languages, in addition to Kiswahili and Portuguese, and all are updated daily. This daily updating and maintenance consumes a large proportion of the resources allocated to the language sites. The websites developed by the Department for conferences and events are also made available in the six languages. While overall progress has not been as fast as desired, key information areas on the website have made significant strides in enhancing the multilingual nature of the site.

IV. Current website usage

12. Visitors from more than 199 countries and territories access the United Nations website, viewing more than one million pages daily. Total accesses ("hits") have grown from over 2.16 billion in 2003 to over 2.7 billion in 2005. The United Nations website currently receives an average of over 7.5 million accesses daily. Pages viewed rather than accesses provide a more accurate indication of actual usage of the material. The increases in the number of pages viewed and accesses to

the entire site in 2005, compared with the previous years, are presented in table 1 below.

Table 1
Pages viewed and accesses to the United Nations website (2002-2005)

www.un.org	*Pages viewed*	*Accesses*
A. Yearly totals		
2002	221 433 750	1 606 841 549
2003	268 027 080	2 165 122 997
2004	337 544 975	2 331 566 302
2005	396 566 178	2 766 987 638
B. Daily averages		
2002	606 668	4 402 306
2003	734 321	5 931 844
2004	922 254	6 370 490
2005	1 085 762	7 575 761

13. The upward trend in the use of the website has been consistent among the language sites, although the scale of the increase varies widely. Table 2 below depicts the increase in the number of accesses, as well as the number of pages viewed across the language sites from 2004 to 2005.

Table 2
Increase in the number of page views and accesses to the United Nations website across languages (2005 against 2004)

	Arabic	*Chinese*	*English*	*French*	*Russian*	*Spanish*	*Entire United Nations website*
Accesses							
2004	42 525 599	80 332 093	1 813 864 719	148 614 628	45 947 257	200 282 006	2 331 566 302
2005	60 060 418	91 653 371	2 099 191 364	198 244 221	61 564 818	256 273 446	2 766 987 638
2005 vs. 2004 (percentage)	+41.23	+14.09	+15.73	+33.39	+33.99	+27.96	+18.68
Pages viewed							
2004	7 760 675	13 619 715	276 026 961	15 150 059	9 575 366	15 412 199	337 544 975
2005	10 178 618	18 433 275	318 133 891	18 267 863	11 873 869	19 678 662	396 566 178
2005 vs. 2004 (percentage)	+31.16	+35.34	+15.25	+20.58	+24.00	+27.68	+17.49

14. As table 3 below shows, the overall number of new pages on the site has steadily risen. The Department is presently responsible for the majority of these language pages. The Web Services Section, which handles the bulk of these pages, has posted more new or updated pages in languages other than English or French,

demonstrating the same progress in closing the gap between languages in key areas. The table also demonstrates that the creation of new pages requires more maintenance and updating. Table 3 shows the number of pages handled by the Web Services Section only.

Table 3
New pages created and pages updated in 2004 and 2005 by the Web Services Section of the Department of Public Information

New pages						*Updated pages*					
Arabic	*Chinese*	*English*	*French*	*Russian*	*Spanish*	*Arabic*	*Chinese*	*English*	*French*	*Russian*	*S*
787	2 115	984	904	1 219	1 163	4 645	3 493	3 802	2 580	4 381	

V. Achievements

15. The General Assembly, in its resolution 60/109 B, stressed the need to adopt a decision on the multilingual development, maintenance and enrichment of the United Nations website and requested the Secretary-General to submit proposals to establish separate units for each of the six official languages within the Department of Public Information, in order to achieve full parity among the official languages of the United Nations.

16. As a result of the closure of United Nations Information Centres in Western Europe, one P-4 and six General Service posts were deployed to the Web Services Section in January 2004. The formal recruitment to the P-4 post enabled the Department to establish the first of the six language units, the Arabic Website Unit, on 1 December 2004. In accordance with paragraph 2 of section IX of General Assembly resolution 59/276 of 23 December 2004, the Department submitted proposals to strengthen the capacity of the United Nations website, within the context of the programme budget for the biennium 2006-2007. Four new P-4 posts were requested to complete the establishment of the language units and have been approved by the General Assembly. With the creation of the language units, the Website Languages Unit has been dissolved. The encumbered P-4 post of the Chief of that Unit has been designated as the Chief of the English Language Unit. This increased capacity will allow improved management of each language site on a continuous basis, as opposed to the current situation where each language is left without professional coverage for approximately eight weeks of the year as a result of leave schedules, illness or travel. This enhanced capacity will permit an acceleration of processing of new pages in languages other than English, more assistance to other departments to render their content in other languages, and more resources for maintenance of existing pages. There will be increased assistance towards content generation for the News Centre and other new sites, as well as the processing of more material translated pro bono by a number of universities (see below).

17. The scale of the additional resources required to achieve parity has been presented in earlier reports. With the new resources referred to in paragraph 16, the Department will continue to strive towards improving parity without sacrificing the comprehensiveness and the up-to-date nature of the site. Additional new pages in all languages will be available at a greater frequency. Key to this strategy is a focus on

heavily used sites covering a wide range of activities. Language parity has already been achieved in the General Assembly, Security Council, news and radio portions of the site. The Department will strive to expand these areas. Special attention will be paid to areas showing higher levels of usage.

18. The Department has taken a number of steps to supplement staffing resources in the drive to enhance multilingualism on the website. In this regard, the Department wishes to express its gratitude to the Government of Spain for continuing to provide an associate expert for the development of the Spanish site, and to the Government of France for providing an associate expert to work on the French site. The Department continues to aggressively utilize the services of interns and skilled volunteers in a number of the official languages to complement the work performed by the staff.

19. Many content-providing offices lack the expertise to provide their content in official languages other than English. The Department has been sharing the expertise it has developed over the past 10 years, and is assisting other content-providing offices in rendering their English pages into the official languages, on a cost-reimbursable basis. For example, under arrangements with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the economic and social development area of the website and many of the *Global Issues on the UN Agenda* pages have been made available in all languages. Similar arrangements are in the process of being set up with other departments in order to assist in rendering their content into the other official languages.

20. As previously reported, the Department has also managed to increase the number of pages available in some languages by use of external pro bono translations provided by academic institutions. Agreements are in place with the University of Salamanca (Spain), Shaoxing University (China) and Minsk State Linguistic University (Belarus), resulting in an increased number of new pages for Chinese, Russian and Spanish. While that action has increased the pool of available material in the three languages, the need for editorial control, programming and processing, given the Department's limited staff resources, has presented a bottleneck to the full utilization of this translation capacity. It is expected that the addition of the new posts will address this issue and allow greater use to be made of these pro bono translations.

21. Improving the user experience of finding information on the United Nations website has been an important aspect of enhancing the website. To this end, the site-wide search engine was successfully implemented on the United Nations website in September 2004. A visitor to the United Nations website is now able to search for material in all official languages, and retrieve content available on the United Nations site or ODS, or any one of several websites of participating offices away from Headquarters. There are a total of 36 United Nations servers worldwide being indexed by the search engine. All customization on the content and layout of the search and search-result pages was developed in-house for the six United Nations official languages, which includes non-Roman alphabet and bi-directional languages. This has made possible the global search option on the ODS site as well.

22. The transition to an upgraded search engine began in November 2005, and was completed by the end of January 2006. This upgrade has enabled the creation of more defined areas of search and is providing continuous indexing, so that new materials are also available through the search function without delay. The

Department continues to work with the Information Technology Services Division and the search engine vendor on ways to improve the speed and ease of information searches on the United Nations website. Key matches have been created in order to identify the web pages most likely to answer queries. News focus pages have been created in an effort to consolidate content types and areas for similar types of information. A user feedback page was created and incorporated on the search results page in all United Nations official languages. However, the full use and further development of the search system to fulfil the demands from other content-providing offices for customized search pages and collections to limit search results to their sites will only be periodic and will take time to implement because the resources required have yet to be identified. Likewise, a quick response to unsuccessful searches requires continuous monitoring. From a management perspective, a much-needed analysis of user search patterns continues to present a challenge. In order to provide this type of follow-up action effectively and efficiently, dedicated resources need to be assigned to it, which means that this task can be achieved only at the cost of limiting progress in other areas.

23. The Web Services Section, using in-house technical and linguistic expertise, is now undertaking programming and graphic design as a common service for all languages. Introducing the use of Unicode has significantly reduced the need to create the underlying programming for each language separately, thus streamlining the work flow and development time by reducing manual inputting and thereby enabling much faster information delivery. The use of Unicode has also resulted in a more uniform appearance of web pages in all official languages. These innovations and productivity improvements through the use of internally developed database applications have also permitted implementation of sites in different languages to be achieved within existing resources. A new United Nations Radio site has been launched in all official languages thanks to using this workflow, which has made possible the creation of language sites in a more compressed time frame. Drawing on these databases, it is now possible to quickly create specific news focus pages in all languages in response to rapidly changing news requirements. A completely automated page for broadcasters is being implemented where broadcasters can download news stories and features for re-broadcast in a broadcast-quality format. United Nations photographs are now available on the web through a database-driven web module that was developed completely in-house. With the rapid increase in the data-driven applications, given the need for back-up and support systems to sustain this daily operation, additional capacity is still required to maintain the systems and applications.

24. The United Nations Webcast has proven to be a cost-effective communications tool with global outreach. It broadcasts daily live and on-demand over the Internet, United Nations meetings such as the Security Council, the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and press briefings, conferences and events from United Nations Headquarters, as well as major United Nations conferences held abroad. It promotes transparency and accessibility by providing instant information to users worldwide on the proceedings of open United Nations meetings. Over 7.2 million webcast clips — both live and archived — were viewed by users from over 175 countries during 2005. The e-mail alert system for the daily webcast schedule garnered 2,196 subscribers in 2005, bringing the total number of subscribers to 4,948.

25. A new webcast studio is now in operation and additional equipment has permitted the expansion of webcasting. At the request of Member States, all open meetings of the General Assembly, the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council are now webcast with the original language of the speaker as well as the English audio. This was introduced for the 2005 World Summit, and was carried into the General Assembly's general debate, furthering the goal of parity among official languages. Contingent upon the availability of adequate webcast facilities and resources, the United Nations Webcast plans to expand its Internet broadcast services into the six official languages.

26. While endeavouring to achieve parity in the six official languages on the United Nations website, especially the enhancement of the multilingual News Centre web portal and its efforts to expand its capacity to provide webcasts simultaneously in official languages, the Department is very conscious of the need to facilitate access, to the extent resources permit, to United Nations information to audiences in languages other than the six official languages of the Organization. The Organization's activities are portrayed to local audiences in 27 other languages, thereby achieving greater universality, thanks in large part to the work of the United Nations information centres, which respond to the needs to these local audiences.

27. As a consequence of the requirement to ensure accessibility to the United Nations website by persons with disabilities, including visual and hearing disabilities, a portion of the existing resources has been allocated to this function. There are widely differing standards between countries, as well as within the international Internet community. A single recognized set of standards that can be applied to all languages is yet to emerge. The Department has been working with the Inclusive Development Section of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, and through that Section with experts in the field, to progress in this area. The Department has already begun the use of software that allows developers to partially automate testing to meet accessibility and usability guidelines and to simplify the process of understanding and complying with the World Wide Web Consortium standards, which at the present time is the only standard with worldwide acceptance. The Department has so far implemented the basic accessibility requirements for the top layers of the site and is still working on wider implementation. The following steps are being followed:

(a) Ensuring that all new pages are created in conformity with the accepted standards of the World Wide Web Consortium;

(b) Maintaining the difference between structure and presentation elements; using style sheets where appropriate;

(c) Using Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML), version 4.0, features to provide information about the purpose and function of elements;

(d) Ensuring that the pages can be navigated by keyboard;

(e) Providing alternative methods to access non-textual content, including images, scripts, multimedia, tables, forms and frames, for user agents that do not display them.

28. It is important to note that ensuring compliance with the minimum requirements for access by persons with disabilities is not without cost. Current efforts to this end have resulted in an overall slowdown in the production and

updating of existing pages. On average, each new or updated page requires an additional processing time of 15 to 20 per cent to achieve compliance. Development and updates of existing pages have been reduced, thereby further slowing down the progress towards parity among official languages.

VI. Looking forward

29. The Department plans to modernize the architecture of the website to provide faster access to the features users actually seek. Improving navigation and usability of a website is critical to a successful site. For this to be achieved, the website development process must include detailed site traffic analysis. More sophisticated analysis will permit prioritization to topics of interest across languages. The Web Services Section continuously monitors and analyses site usage and is providing nearly 150 daily and monthly log analysis statistics. In 2005, the log analysis features were expanded in order to introduce new analytic parameters (key word analysis, more identifiable visitor country location, broken links reports, etc.) and to ensure improved response to the user demands as well as enhanced quality control. However, there is a necessary trade-off in the allocation of available resources between site development, parity among languages, compliance with disability requirements and site analysis.

30. One of the constraints in moving towards parity among languages is the level of technical expertise available in author departments and offices. In collaboration with the Training Service of the Office of Human Resources Management, the Department has brought specialized training in relevant web development software in-house. This cost-effective measure has afforded an opportunity to all staff working on their respective sites to enhance their skills and be more productive. Paragraph 16 above describes the benefits to accrue from the four new P-4 posts in the Web Services Section, including an acceleration in page accession, although the pace and scale of this will be affected by the need to continue the normal maintenance and upgrading work. The recruitment of junior staff with the appropriate skill sets for web design and programming has been a problem. Three P-2 posts in the Web Development Unit could only be filled by temporary staff, since no suitable staff were found as a result of the competitive examination for recruitment to the Professional category of staff members from other categories and the national competitive examinations during the past two years. To address this issue, the Department, in collaboration with the Office of Human Resources Management, introduced a special national competitive examination in web development in 2005.

31. The Department is collaborating with the Information Technology Services Division and other content-providing offices in the search for an enterprise content management system that will be capable of handling the language, presentation, multimedia and accessibility requirements of the website, and for a new and improved enterprise search system. The search has proved to be extremely complex in that it appears that no integrated system is currently capable of fully handling all the required aspects. The Department is continuing the evaluation of systems in collaboration with the Information Technology Services Division and other content-providing offices.

32. While awaiting the identification, acquisition and implementation of an enterprise content management system, the Department will continue to redesign portions of the United Nations website in 2006, and will progressively incorporate more database-driven features. Increasingly automated processes and easy access to news and latest developments will be introduced, as will be better navigation, presentation, search and accessibility in compliance with disability requirements.

33. The Department is also cooperating with the Information Technology Services Division in the multilingual desktop project by providing information on the settings of standard enterprise applications which enable them to work with the three non-Latin official languages, and to explore if these settings can be set automatically.

34. To meet new technology standards and demands, the Department will continue its cooperation and collaboration with the Information Technology Services Division to improve the technological infrastructure of the website. In late 2005, the database servers, which had reached almost crisis proportions, were replaced with new equipment, resulting in considerable performance improvement. The expansion of the capacity to disseminate information, access to news by RSS feeds, sending news to mobile devices and creating news mailing lists is included in the plan to improve technological infrastructure. Owing to the technical infrastructure requirements of handling large amounts of outgoing mail, the e-mail news alerts service in the languages will be implemented on a step-by-step basis.

35. The project on the United Nations system portal is also under way. The Information Technology Services Division, together with user offices, has completed the requirements identification phase and is now moving forward to the evaluation stage.

VII. Conclusion

36. The Department is striving to accelerate the pace of moving towards parity among the official languages on the website. The establishment of new P-4 posts goes a long way towards providing much of the resources needed to meet the challenge of parity among official languages as outlined in document A/57/355. With the establishment of separate language units, the Department will be able to increase the volume of new material going onto the site and the required maintenance and updating. It will also have more capacity to work with content-providing offices to accelerate their posting of material in all official languages, backed by a stronger governance mechanism. This positive development will be reinforced by other measures, including the necessary technical enhancements.

37. Parity, however, should not be achieved at the cost of quality. Continual development of the site is vital to ensuring user satisfaction and to widening access. To this end, the technological infrastructure is being overhauled, a new content management system is being sought, and the site is being revamped to provide better navigation and improved access for persons with disabilities.

38. The Department is focusing on key areas, not only with new pages with textual information, but including webcasting, audio, video and photographic materials, all enhancing the multilingual nature of the United Nations website and aimed at continually broadening its outreach to a wider range of audiences in all regions of the world.